

Part 2: The establishment of the ‘British muslim community’

Introduction

Until about 20 years ago there was no such thing as a ‘British muslim community’. In this part of the article we will see how the ‘British muslim community’ emerged out of the socio-political development which also brought about the rise of New Labour: the retreat of class struggle both internationally and in the UK, the related retreat of social democracy which sought to represent the working class, and the increase of social mobility as a result of the post-war settlement. An important question is how the ‘British muslim community’ was created from the existing muslim communities in Britain, and why this development did not lead to other national identifications such as, for example, a ‘British Black community’.

In order to answer this question, we will first consider the creation and characters of the concrete communities of immigrants in Britain, their differences and the specificity of south Asian muslim communities. Next we will see how two historical factors (the application of the so-called ‘multiculturalist’ strategies in the UK and the rise of political Islam) contributed to the formation of the present concept of ‘British muslim community’ and the creation of a body which represents it. In particular, we will see how the same social and historical context promoted, on the one hand, the ascendance of a highly politicized Asian middle class, able to constitute a representative body for an abstractly defined ‘muslim community’ at a national level. Yet, on the other hand, this same social and historical context tended to increasingly divide the concrete Asian communities. We will also see that these two aspects of the ‘British muslim community’, its concrete division and abstract unity, were necessary and opposite and reflected a dynamic of mutual support and power antagonisms between the *petit bourgeoisie* within the muslim communities and the ascendant middle class.

Immigration in the UK and the creation of muslim communities

In this section we will consider the context created by the retreat of class struggle and the establishment of the socio-political strategy of ‘multiculturalism’. This strategy was first pioneered in the 1980s by new left Labour in the Great London Council (GLC) and other councils with a large presence of black/Asian populations as a response to the anti racist riots which had threatened the political stability of Britain – and was later developed at a national level under the New Labour government. We will look at the relation between the ideology behind the multiculturalist strategy (which we have introduced in the previous part) and its concrete nature as a specific class alliance. We will also see how this strategy aimed at dividing the working class along ethnic lines and encouraged, as a consequence, increasing divisions within the concrete Asian communities.

The largest waves of immigration came to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, and were mainly from the West Indies and the Indian subcontinent, major parts of the British empire. In

the ‘50s the government, started a campaign of recruitment of manpower from the West Indies in order to fill the demand for labour of the post-war boom. Young men mostly from Jamaica and Barbados were used to fill labour demands for menial work in the public sector (National Health Service, British National Rail, bus services etc.).

Also, following the independence of India and Pakistan in 1947, thousands of Indians and Pakistanis (including people from the area which would become Bangladesh) emigrated to Britain. People from south Asia tended to find jobs in factories in industrialized areas of England, some of them, who had capital to invest, opened corner shops or ran post offices. Following the Indo-Pakistani war of 1971 a new wave of Pakistani and Bangladeshi people arrived and settled in Britain.

Until the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962 all Commonwealth citizens were able to come to Britain without any restrictions. However, from the 1960s through the 1970s British legislation increasingly limited immigration, while however facilitating the arrival of spouses and close relatives through so-called ‘family reunification schemes’.¹ These family reunification schemes were historically fundamental for the creation of immigrants’ communities in Britain.

Immigrants from same areas tended to cluster together in areas where rents were cheaper, people spoke the same language or, when it was the case, they already had some family or village connections. This tendency created large urban areas of given ethnic populations e.g., Brixton in London. However, clustering together does not in itself create ‘communities’ and does not explain the structure or character of existing communities. The characters of various communities and their differences were the result of historical and social factors: the character of the original social relations, how far these relations were transplanted to Britain, and the opportunity they had to be reproduced.

West Indian workers were recruited from among the poorest plantation workers in Jamaica or Barbados. They originated from African slaves, and their family structures were traditionally matriarchal and non hierarchical. The process of emigration, implemented through British government schemes, weakened and often disintegrated the immigrants’ family relations. This does not mean that African-Caribbeans did not make efforts to create relations of solidarity or ‘communities’: they felt the brunt of racism even more strongly than Asians and had to struggle to survive against widespread white British hostility and discrimination. In these conditions, women would often join together in self-help groups and female relatives would try, as much as possible, to live in the same neighbourhood in order to support each other.

¹ Between the 1960s and 1970s the government began to impose limits to further immigration and the right to automatic citizenship (1961 The Commonwealth Immigration Act and more strict amendment/regulations in ‘68, ‘69, ‘71, ‘81). By the ‘70s ‘automatic’ citizenship was recognized only to ‘patrials’ (English, Welsh, Scottish) and *skin colour* started to be an issue.

In contrast the Asian communities were both highly hierarchical and patriarchal, and allowed for tight control of individuals and families by community leaders. These relations were deeply rooted in south Asian society and had the opportunity to be re-created in Britain. While African-Caribbeans were recruited by the British government under government schemes, south Asians who moved to Britain did so on their own initiative. Men from relatively wealthy and powerful families who could afford to travel and set themselves up in Britain would then attract individuals from their same village, helping them to find jobs and accommodation. The power structure of the original village structure was then reproduced in Britain on the basis of patron-client relations – ethnic identity was then based on a material, economic, relation of dependence, fundamental for the individual's reproduction and survival in an alien country.

The various inter-relations of power among families were then reproduced in the new generations through subsequent arranged marriages, which connected families together, and which could be implemented through strong patriarchal authority. Thus, while a patriarchal Asian community would be reproduced as a closed community, the loose and matriarchal African-Caribbean community was more amenable to integration in wider British society.

Besides the communities of south Asians, muslim immigrants came to Britain in smaller numbers from other areas of the world. For example, Asians emigrated to Britain from African countries such as Kenya or Uganda following their independence from Britain. Many of these emigrants had been part of a relatively privileged social layer and the middle class in the African countries of origin, and were more likely to integrate into wider British society as bourgeois individuals.²

Other muslim immigrants in the UK were Arabs or Persians allowed into the UK from the Middle East as refugees. Although they too tended to join relatives and hence cluster together in given areas, they had no opportunity to form structured communities like those of Indians, Pakistanis or Bangladeshis, as they trickled into the country as individuals under, by then, extremely tight immigration restrictions. Furthermore, despite sharing the same religion they did not, and could not, integrate themselves within the already established south Asian communities.

Thus at the dawn of the establishment of 'muslim Britain' there was no such 'muslim' unifying identity at all.³ The process of immigration seen above created structured communities of south Asians tightly tied together through family connections and arranged marriages. These communities were separated not only from the white British

population, the African-Caribbeans, and other Arab immigrants, but they were also divided between themselves. Not only were south Asians in Britain divided by nationality and languages, not only might they originate from countries which were alien or hostile to each other, but they were also divided into even smaller, closed, extended family groups: there were, for example, Sylhetis (or better families from the Sylhet area of Bangladesh: Sunamganj, Habiganj, Beani Bazar, Maulvi Bazar, etc.), not 'Bangladeshi' – let alone 'muslims'!



The community, the individual and the class

The community structures imported from south Asia to Britain faced contradictory forces within the British capitalist system.

On the one hand, African-Caribbean and Asian immigrants experienced racial hostility from the native white lower middle class and sections of the working class.⁴ This separation and hostility forced the individuals to look within their community for mutual help and solidarity and tended to reinforce the community as a closed system.

On the other, the direct social relations within communities could only survive and reproduce themselves through commercial relations with an outside – the capitalist system in which the community was immersed. This would inevitably weaken the direct relations in the community: when what counts is the money in the individual's pocket, the relevance of personal relations of gratitude, loyalty and kinship start to be put under question.⁵

The process of fragmentation and individualization was of course stronger for the new British-born generations, who felt less strong ties with their original families in Asia, and who

² The British empire based its control over African colonies through a layer of Asian middle class transplanted to Africa from south Asia. This Asian social layer was both privileged and dependable as British rule was crucial for their survival. With the independence of British African colonies, many businessmen and middle class Asians were allowed into the UK to escape reprisal. Also, between 1965 and the beginning of the '70s Uganda expelled all the 50,000 Gujarati Indians from Uganda.

³ It was true that the individual's religion was important, yet it was not the fundamental factor in their social relations and reproduction.

⁴ Racism was the consequence of the same capitalist policies which encouraged immigration. We have said that immigration was allowed by the government because of the need for reconstruction in the post-war boom. However, behind the 'need for reconstruction', there was also the need to break the union strength of the British working class. Many trade unionists would consequently see immigrant workers as a threat to their power and to the establishment which this power was rooted in. The increasing number of immigrants in Britain soon became an issue for racist and conservative fears.

⁵ These tensions would also create double standards within families. Often working men felt under pressure to adopt westernized habits while still keeping their women inside and imposing their patriarchal authority on them.

tended to assimilate with other children at school or outside school. These young people experienced conflicting feelings toward their authoritarian family and society, which protected and nurtured them, but also exercised control over them. They resented being packaged for an arranged marriage, when their schoolmates talked about romance. They were excited about experimenting with music, drugs or other activities which their parents would find objectionable.

While capitalism tended to fragment the community into bourgeois individuals, it also constituted the condition for alternative, class based solidarity. The Asian working class had to earn a wage to live, and, as all the working class, experienced alienation, antagonism, and the material need to oppose capital collectively. In addition, it was not true that all of south Asia was a backward pre-capitalist blob. Many workers came from areas of India and Pakistan where capitalism had already established its contradictions through the British empire and had already experience of unionized struggles in workplaces, and a secular and Marxist perspective.⁶ By the 1950s the Communist party was a major political force in India, showing that the workers movement which it sought to represent was certainly not a tiny drop in the ocean of a fundamentally religious-based society.

Indian workers imported their traditions of unionized class struggle to Britain long before the 1950s: the 'Indian Workers Association' (IWA) was formed among a very small number of Indian workers in the 1930s to support the struggle for independence in their country of origin. After the immigration waves of the 1950s the IWA saw a revival and inspired the creation of the 'Pakistani Workers Association' (PWA) and the 'Bangladeshi Workers Association' (BWA), which organized industrial workers. During the '60s and '70s these organizations were involved in struggles for equality in workplaces, against the increasingly strict immigration government policies, and against racism.

The IWA (PWA and BWA) were pulled and pushed by the contradictions mentioned above. On the one hand these Asian workers' organizations often reflected separations inherited from the Asian subcontinent (castes, families, etc.). On the other, the praxis of struggle necessitated the creation of common understanding and solidarity across ethnic divisions. During the '60s and '70s the Asian workers organizations created wide fronts with white workers' organizations, leftwing parties and anti-racism campaigners in struggles against racism.

The separation of white and immigrant workers created by government policies, as well as the internal 'community' divisions among the Asian workers themselves, were thus challenged by active participation to common struggle. This practical experience was reflected by the development of consciousness among the Asian organized working class. Class identity, equality, solidarity across ethnic groups and races, challenged not only the racism of white union leaders and the white right wing, but also the identity of the Asian individual originally defined along community lines.



The new generation's struggles – the riots of 1981

Around the beginning of the 1980s young Asian people were protagonists in street riots in urban areas across Britain.

African-Caribbean youth were not new to street riots – since the late 1950s they had clashed with racist white youth and the police.⁷ Yet these new riots would have a different character: they would not be 'race riots' but anti-police, anti-fascist insurrections; and African Caribbeans, Asian and white youth would take part in these battles against the common enemy, or would emulate each other in different towns. The riots peaked in 1981, when fights and battles spread across Britain like wildfire (Brixton, Toxteth, Southall, Moss Side, Leeds, Handsworth, Leicester, Halifax, Bedford, Gloucester, Coventry, Bristol...).

Before the beginning of the '80s Asian youth were not generally involved in riots. Protected but also disciplined by their patriarchal, authoritarian families, they could see a future for themselves in their fathers' industry or shop and felt no incentive to rebel. In contrast, African-Caribbean youth came into confrontation with the established social order long before Asians did precisely because their communities were not as closed and structured, and individuals had to try to integrate earlier within British society. As a consequence, they were more vulnerable to racism and discrimination.

However, with the end of the '70s and the Thatcher era things would also change for Asian youth. With the closure of large factories in the north and mass unemployment the struggle was bound to move from the factory to the street, and would involve the younger generation.

This new wave of struggles had an effect on the understanding and self-identity of the new generation of Asians. Groups involved in those struggles would meet, discuss and think about demands and possibilities, developing the conscious side of their practical experience. One of these organizations was the 'Asian Youth Movement'. The AYM reflected the emergence of a new cross-ethnic identity, which was precisely the result of solidarity across ethnic and/or

⁶ However distorted by the dominant Stalinist ideology at the time.

⁷ For example the 1958 riots in Nottingham and in Notting Hill (London), caused by fights between white and African-Caribbean youth.

religious divisions. In order to challenge any such divisions, the participants defined themselves as 'black', a positive and inclusive definition taken up in spite of racist propaganda. Also the AYM reflected a common identification of the enemy in the repressive authorities (including the police and the threat of fascism). Significantly, and coherently, the AYM would also attack and criticize despotism within their own community – the power of the mosques and the imposition of patriarchal authority, above all on women.

While capitalism tended to separate the new British-born generation of Asians from their own communities and turn them into individuals desiring bourgeois freedom, these struggles created a secular, non-religious, non-ethnic unity, which could provide these young people with the strength to challenge their traditional authorities.

This secular and non-ethnic consciousness mirrored the practical unity of the participants in the antifascist riots of the '80s, which was the fundamental factor that made them politically relevant. Indeed, it was precisely because these riots were not 'ethnic' riots that they could spread across Britain threatening Thatcher's authority.

The obvious response from the state to this threat was therefore to divide the class – and the obvious dividing line was the ethnic. With the Scarman report in 1981 the state began to construe the problem of rebellious youth as a mainly racial and ethnic issue.

It was true, as Scarman noted, that racist policing and discrimination were an issue for black people – yet Scarman looked at young people's antagonism to the state, which had common grounds and a common enemy, and reduced it into an 'ethnic' or 'minority' issue. Its recommendations for the local authorities, to adopt 'community policies' which tackled ethnic issues, would fit more with the New Labour ideology of multiculturalism than the old Tory ideology. In fact, as we will see next, these recommendations would be brought into practice within the so-called multiculturalist strategy by (mostly) Labour councils and would divide and pit sections of the class against each other: precisely, along ethnic lines.

A response: The multiculturalist policy

As an answer to the riots, since the beginning of the '80s a number of local authorities pioneered a new specific social policy, which would be called 'multiculturalist policy' (or simply multiculturalism).⁸

The GLC led by Ken Livingstone began the most renowned multiculturalist project, made of 'consultations' with 'ethnic communities' regarding the public sector, 'equal opportunity' policies, and the establishment of race relations units in the Council and the police.⁹ Within this initiative, representatives from ethnic communities would be also given roles within public institutions (such as hospitals, schools, etc.) and in the Council. A whole new network of relations between the local

authorities and individuals within the 'ethnic' communities was encouraged to develop.

Bradford council started a similar project in 1981, in the aftermath of the city's riots, and issued a race-relations plan which declared Bradford a 'multiracial, multicultural city'.¹⁰

Through the '80s to the '90s multiculturalism would grow from a 'loony lefty' practice limited to a handful of councils to a mainstream, widely accepted, ideology, whose vocabulary is unquestionably accepted as 'common sense' and would have a central role in the social policies of New Labour.

Within the multiculturalist strategy councils like Bradford financially supported the creation of lobby groups around cliques of notables and authoritative 'community leaders'. This normally led to the creation of 'councils of mosques' or other similar religious lobbies: for example, Bradford Council supported the creation of the Bradford Council of Mosques; the Federation for Sikh Organizations and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad.¹¹

Within the multiculturalist strategy, religious organizations received funds from local authorities and were treated as main interlocutors – this role would strengthen their prestige and power within their 'community'. In return, they were delegated a number of social activities through which they would get in touch and control individuals in their community (e.g. care for the elderly or the management of unemployment).¹²

Behind its postmodern gloss and its sentimentality for ethnic and cultural diversity, then, the multiculturalist project constituted a new class alliance. It meant in practice the redirection of wealth from the working class within the community to their leaders and their pet projects.¹³

It is important to add that the multiculturalist policies tended to privilege the Asian communities and would then pave the way to the future development of a 'muslim Britain – instead of a 'black Britain'. As the multiculturalist strategy relied on the authority of 'community leaders' to re-impose social order within their communities, since the beginning, it tended to neglect the African-Caribbean 'communities': unlike the Asian structured, patriarchal communities, the prevalently matriarchal African-Caribbean communities, loose and lacking structured means to control their youths, were not convincing partners for the local authorities.

This would create the increasingly strong liaison between new Labour politicians and the south Asian communities – which would lay the foundations for the alliance of New Labour and the 'British muslim community'.

¹⁰ Malik, op. cit.

¹¹ A long list of commentators (e.g. Arun Kundnani, 'The death of multiculturalism', *Race and Class*, 2002 <http://www.irr.org.uk/2002/april/ak000001.html>) compared the multiculturalist strategy with the colonial arrangement adopted by the British empire in the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent, where they would rely on the authority of 'community leaders' through their extended family networks for ensuring local control.

¹² 'Jihad' by Gilles Kepel, p. 198

¹³ Of course no Labour politician would say that the aim of multiculturalist strategies was to redirect wealth away from the working class. The promoters of multiculturalism really believed that by allowing funds for promoting ethnic culture and religion they gave the 'ethnic minorities' what they really wanted.

⁸ We will use the term 'multiculturalist strategy' for the implementation of specific policies and 'multiculturalism' for the underlying ideology discussed in Part 1.

⁹ Kenan Malik, 'The trouble with multiculturalism' <http://www.spiked-online.com/Articles/00000002D35E.htm>

Identity as ethnic identity

For the Asians who had experienced class struggle in the '70s, the re-imposition of bourgeois law and order on the street and market discipline would through the '80s signal the abandonment of class identity.

The retreat of class struggle left a void – bourgeois fragmentation. Paradoxically, but not surprisingly, this fragmentation and separation was encouraged by the implementation of multiculturalist policies: by offering funds to groups in recognition to their cultural identity, these policies constituted a major material factor which helped to fragment the Asian population into competing ethnic groups, alien and often hostile to each other.

Also secularism declined as religious issues were now encouraged to emerge, welcomed from both sides of the multiculturalist alliance. From the perspective of community leaders, indeed, religious issues were about re-establishing their social control. While for those who were to become the New Labour ruling elite, the celebration of 'ethnic' and traditional cultures was a 'radical', excitingly postmodern and safely classless alternative to the anti-establishment ideas of the '70s.

Crucially, however, the creation of religious lobbies having a role in local political life would encourage the transformation of cultural issues into political demands. This was particularly true for the muslim lobbies since this transformation coincided with the popularity of political Islam as a political ideology based on religion.

Thus throughout the 1980s muslim lobbies which had been set up and supported by local authorities became the focus for vociferous campaigns and protests over religious demands, rallying the people of their community in support. As an important example, the Bradford Council of Mosques began campaigning in 1983 over single sex classes, the provision of halal meat in schools, and other such issues and involved parents and young people in these protests.¹⁴ In return for lobbying and protesting the working class was offered a spectacular contemplation of the abstract power of 'their community' vis-à-vis the outer world (mainly white, and western). This power was in fact the concrete power of religious leaders vis-à-vis their faithful.

We will see that this political activity would allow lobbies such as the Bradford Council of Mosques to acquire a key role in the creation of 'muslim Britain'.

A new unity in political Islam and the emergence of the 'British muslim community'

A key element essential to the establishment of the 'British muslim community' was the rise at a world level of the ideology and practice of political Islam, following the end of the cold war, the decline of national liberation movements and

¹⁴ Even people belonging to the AYM got involved in the protests for halal meat at school, but this was only the beginning of the end: *the AYM would soon disappear*. Analogously, elements from the vanishing BWA and PWA would be involved in organizing national demonstrations of 'muslims' around the Rushdie affair.

of social democracy. In this section we will see how political Islam provided the ideological grounds for an abstract unification of concretely fragmented muslim communities and how national struggles around Islamic issues promoted the constitution of national lobby groups which would act as representatives of the 'British muslim community' vis-à-vis the emerging New Labour government. We will also consider the paradoxes of the abstract unity and concrete divisions of this representative body and the power and class conflicts expressed by them.



The retreat of class struggle and the rise of political Islam world-wide

Multiculturalism was only one side which encouraged the emergence of the so-called 'muslim community' in Britain: the other was the rise of political Islam.¹⁵

The conjuncture of the new class alliance based on multiculturalist policies and the rise of political Islam was not a coincidence. These two facts originated from the same historical change: the retreat of class struggle internationally, the consequent retreat of social democracy, the end of the cold war and of national liberation movements across the globe. In muslim countries the retreat of pan-Arab and Stalinist

¹⁵ In this article, by the term 'political Islam' (and Islamism) we intend any ideology which interprets Islam as essential part of a political programme. This definition is very broad: political Islamist organizations were created in different contexts and had very different class bases and specific issues, yet they shared some fundamental ideological presuppositions.

modernising tendencies encouraged the resurgence of Islamist movements.

The Islamist 'Muslim Brotherhood',¹⁶ notorious for assaulting left wing militants in the streets of Cairo and organising assassinations of Egyptian government leaders, re-emerged at the end of the 1970s. The Muslim Brotherhood had been suppressed in Egypt in 1948 but spread to other muslim countries as an underground organization. With the decadence of pan-Arabism, the Muslim Brotherhood had the opportunity to be resuscitated.¹⁷ Encouraged by the possibility offered by the new political situation to impose itself as a mainstream political current, the Muslim Brothers' organisations in most countries have recently undergone a facelift of bourgeois respectability.¹⁸

In 1978-9 the US, Saudi Arabia and the Pakistani government funded and encouraged Islamist combatants¹⁹ to fight the USSR occupation of Afghanistan. At an ideological level, this war served to confer prestige to key promoters, first in line Saudi Arabia and its version of strict and anti-west Islamic fundamentalism, Wahhabism.

Concurrent with the war in Afghanistan was the 'Iranian Revolution' of 1979. The revolution in Iran against the old pro-US regime of the Shah was the outcome of a widespread social insurrection which followed intense struggles and strikes in workplaces. Despite the great mobilization of the class, eventually the revolution was recuperated and subdued under an Islamic regime led by the Grand Ayatollah Seyyed Rudollah Musavi Khomeini.

Since 1979, rivalry over influence of the Islamic world would continue between Khomeini and the Saudi establishment. Wahhabi's world-wide prestige was based on oil revenues donated by Riyadh to Islamic groups and 'charities' worldwide. It was for example Saudi Arabia which massively funded the construction of recent new mosques in the UK. Saudi Arabia also controlled the publication of religious materials for world-wide distribution. This had a profound effect in the diffusion of political Islam in the UK in the '80s and '90s.

While Saudi Arabia based its influence on the material power of money, the rising Shia star preferred to count on the immaterial glitter of ideology. The international fury at the end of the '80s around the Rushdie affair offered to Khomeini the unmissable opportunity to become the recognized worldwide champion of Islam: using his authority as Ayatollah, Khomeini issued an Islamic order ('fatwa'), asking all muslims to try to kill the British writer and muslim renegade. Eventually, the 'fatwa' deflated. Despite the fact that all of the Islamist world

was united in morally condemning Rushdie, the fatwa was opposed by most Islamist organizations, and neglected by the sullen Saudi regime and eventually nobody bothered to kill Rushdie.²⁰ However, we will see that the Rushdie affair would be central to the creation of a national organization representing the 'muslim community' in Britain.

The retreat of class struggle and the rise of political Islam in Britain

In Britain, the retreat of class struggle, the atomization of muslim individuals and the new social mobility of the Thatcher years prepared the terrain for the appeal of political Islam. Political Islam was a new ideology which predicated the unity of muslims not only across national states, but, importantly, across local communities – the unity of individuals as abstract muslims. Political Islam had thus an appeal for those individuals whose traditional ties had been weakened and for whom the community-based traditions of their fathers had lost their relevance. These were two specific different categories of muslims: the emerging middle class and the youth.

We have seen that in the 1980s a new generation of middle class emerged from the lower classes, thanks to the social mobility of the post-war years. These were not only New Labour politicians (as mentioned in Part 1), but also individuals from ethnic communities, including Asians. However, climbing the social ladder into mainstream Britain also implied the weakening of old ties and the fragmentation of the middle class as bourgeois individuals. Political Islam offered to these middle class individuals a form of Islamic belonging and political identity which did not need to be based on old social ties and practices – in practice, an abstract bourgeois, new world-view.

Middle class professionals and businessmen, who need to be considered part of the respectable socio-political establishment, tend to favour moderate forms of Islamism, like Jamaat e-Islami and the Muslim Brotherhood. Jamaat e-Islami originated in Pakistan during the Pakistan war and has a special appeal for individuals of Pakistani descent. The Muslim Brotherhood has a similar appeal for muslims of Arab descent.

For the youngest generations political Islam would offer an answer to isolation, to the frustration and the void created by the retreat of class struggle and the years of Thatcher's individualism. To these young people, political Islam presents itself as a political force able to challenge the status quo and oppose the exploitation of 'muslims' worldwide. Young muslims look to more radical organizations, which are less compromising about western values or issues such as Israel and US military control of the Middle East. The largest of such radical groups is, apparently, Hizb ut-Tahrir, with about 8,500 members: this is an internationalist organization originating in Palestine, but has a broad appeal for young British muslims of any descent.

In the next and final section we will consider the role of political Islam in the creation of the national lobby which sought to represent the 'muslim community' in Britain.

²⁰ We may speculate that the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia did not cause a split in muslims in Britain into 'Shia' and 'Sunni' because there was no united 'muslim community' to divide!

¹⁶ Founded by Hasan al-Banna in 1928.

¹⁷ And eventually manage to assassinate the Egyptian president Sadat in 1981.

¹⁸ In 'The Moderate Muslim Brotherhood', *Foreign Affairs*, 19 March 2007, Robert S. Leiken and Steven Brooke write that: 'The Brotherhood is a collection of national groups with differing outlooks... But all reject global jihad while embracing elections and other features of democracy.... In the past several decades, this current, along with the realities of practical politics pushed much of the Brotherhood toward moderation'.

¹⁹ Including Osama Bin Laden.

The Rushdie affair and the emergence of the Muslim Council of Britain

We have seen that by the 1980s there was no such thing as a 'muslim community' in Britain, and that the multiculturalist strategies tended to separate and alienate even more various communities from each other, by encouraging local lobbies to pursue parochial interests. At the beginning of the '80s religious (even Islamist) community leaders would simply rally their members around local issues, like the education of local girls. Despite appeals from the Tory government to create a single representative body, the muslim communities had been indeed unable to come together at all.

But in 1987 a national scandal motivated key local lobbies to come together at a national level: the publication of the notorious novel *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie.

Since the beginning, the Rushdie affair was an Islamist affair – which mobilized individuals through fundamentalist Islamist networks world-wide. In September 1988 Indian members of the fundamentalist Jamaat e-Islami contacted Manazir Ahsan, the director of the British Jamaat e-Islam's 'Islamic Foundation' in Leicester. Ahsan was proactive in spreading the word in Britain even outside his own organization, as he contacted mosques leaders or other Islamic centres and magazines across the country.

These efforts led to the creation in October 1988 of a national lobby: the UK Action for Islamic Affairs (UKACIA), with a group of middle class intellectuals, professionals and businessmen including Ahsan and university educated businessman Iqbal Sacranie (then a trustee of a mosque in Balham, southwest London) at its core.²¹ This lobby took the Rushdie affair to the national level (as well as to Teheran, stirring up the infamous fatwa).²²

Locally, the protest had a hotspot around Bradford Council of Mosques, which had been contacted by Ahsan. By then this local lobby had already acquired prestige due to its capacity to rally its community around Islamic issues and was expected to be centrally involved in the Rushdie campaign. Bradford's mosque leaders responded by writing to the prime minister about the issue. However, the protest in Bradford soon escaped the 'respectable' leaders' control. On 14 January 1989 local muslims, many of whom were radical youth, staged a public burning of the book, which quickly brought Bradford Council of Mosques and its 'community' into disrepute. Bradford's

²¹ Iqbal Sacranie is an Asian businessman from Malawi, also a leader of the international 'Memon community'. Traditionally a mercantile community from northwest India (Pakistan), the Memons were able to create prosperous communities in south Asia and the Middle East, as well as Africa following the British empire. Memon businessmen and professionals use their original ethnic relations to maintain international connections and have recently established an official 'Memon community' organization at international level. Despite his badge as the leader of this abstract international community, Sacranie does not have roots in any established south Asian community in Britain, as he moved to Britain from Malawi in adult age.

²² On 27 October 1988 UKACIA wrote to all muslim ambassadors in London, including Mr Ahkunzadeh Basti the Iranian charge d'affaires, who forwarded it to Tehran, eventually leading to intervention from Ayatollah Khomeini.

community leaders were accused of supporting medieval views and methods, and some of them were accused (probably correctly) of sympathising with Khomeini's fatwa. Caught in the storm, Bradford Council of Mosques got eclipsed by the more middle class and respectable national lobby UKACIA. However, its priestly leaders such as Maulana²³ Sher Azam would become active members in UKACIA.

UKACIA unsuccessfully campaigned for Rushdie to be condemned under the British blasphemy law. Yet, despite its defeat, UKACIA's activity constituted a milestone for the future development of the 'muslim community'. For the first time, a rather broad national group had been created, uniting politically motivated middle class individuals as well as mosque-based leaders of local Asian communities.

In the following years, elements from UKACIA, networking with other groups across the UK, worked towards the creation of a national lobby who could confidently claim to represent 'the British muslim community': the 'Muslim Council of Britain' (MCB).

However, the divisions among the real muslim communities were such that it took nearly ten year to complete this task: the MCB was inaugurated only in 1997, the year of the historical election of New Labour to power. This was perhaps not a coincidence, and we would rather speculate that the perspective of a New Labour government catalysed and speeded up the process.

So eventually this long and troubled pregnancy was over and the MCB was born in November 1997 with the government's blessing and Iqbal Sacranie as president.

The MCB was a large umbrella group, which included more than 400 affiliates: mosque councils which represented concrete Asian communities, professional bodies which represented abstract 'communities' (such as the 'muslim dentists'), as well as more openly political organisations.

The most important of these organisations, which would have a protagonist role in the later anti-war movement, was the 'Muslim Association of Britain', (MAB). The MAB was created in the same year around a group of middle class individuals of Arab descent close to the British Muslim Brotherhood, and was interested in presenting itself as a moderate and respectable alternative to radical Islam.²⁴

With mosque organizations, representatives of 'muslim dentists' and the MAB in it, the MCB could claim to represent the 'muslim community' as a whole. So was the unity of British muslims into a great community achieved? Not at all. This unit resulted from the political campaigning and activity of a core of motivated individuals, with central elements belonging to Islamist organizations like Jamaat e-Islami or the Muslim Brotherhood. Yet however, this unity of heart and minds did not reflect any unity of real muslim communities.

This was a fundamental contradiction for the MCB: while on the one hand the MCB needed to be broad and

²³ In south Asia 'Maulanas' are religious scholars with a formal qualification, while the term 'Mullah' is often used derogatorily.

²⁴ MAB got into prominence in London by working with the British authorities in taking over London Finsbury Park Mosque and de-radicalising people within it (R. S. Leiken and S. Brooke, 'The Moderate Muslim Brotherhood', *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2007)

comprehensive in order to claim to be really representative of the 'muslim community', on the other hand it had to welcome within its umbrella members with diverse and often alien interests. Due to this contradiction, we will see that the MCB would lack unity and political direction when such a unity was politically needed: during the anti-war movement.

This contradiction was also reflected in tensions between generations and classes within the leadership of the MCB. The old guard of religious scholars in the MCB hardly recognized the authority of those younger professionals and businessmen who had initiated the national lobby, but needed their role as mediators. These professionals had the right education to speak to the New Labourite establishment, the media and the bourgeois world. While the ulemas (religious leaders) had real connections with their local communities, their language was inadequate: the multiculturalist New Labour establishment had encouraged traditional culture and language but only for strict use within their community!

On the other hand the Asian middle class, although quite reactionary, had the right outlook and above all the right political and social connections.

Yet most of these middle class individuals could claim to represent the 'muslim community' only in abstract: to this aim political Islam provides them with the appropriate ideology for the task. With its stress on the abstract unity of 'muslim',

political Islam allows individuals to present themselves as the legitimate representatives of a 'community', whether or not this 'community' coincides with any real one. In its moderate versions such a Jamaat e-Islami or the Muslim Brotherhood, then, political Islam has been instrumental to the new middle class generation in their competition for power against their old fogies, like postmodernism has been instrumental to a new generation of Labourites against the old political establishment.

Part 2 Conclusion

The new class alliances in the 1980s and the retreat of class struggle created the conditions for the formation of a 'British muslim community'. Yet this 'community' emerged paradoxically from a movement which tended to increasingly fragment the concrete muslim communities in Britain, and at the same time tended to create an abstract concept of a unified 'muslim community'. In the next and final part we will see how this 'muslim community' can exist only in a symbiotic interrelation with New Labour based on 'communalist politics'. We will also see how it was in the interest of both New Labour and the MCB to preserve this symbiotic relation during the stresses and strains of the recent events (September 11 and Islami terrorist scare, the war in Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon, and the threat of new social unrest).

Part 3: 'Don't mention the war!'

The 'muslim community' and New Labour: Complementarity



Communalist politics

In Part 2 we saw that immigrants from south Asia sought to transplant and reproduce their original community relations in Britain. We also saw that, although the necessary integration within the advanced capitalist society of Britain tended to strain and fragment the Asians' direct relations, these relations still survive to a certain extent and continue to connect large

extended family groups. Individuals and families in Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi communities are still linked through mutual obligations and patron-client relations, and families are still tied by what remains of traditional moral duties and obligations, such as respect for elders. Although these connections are not as strict and binding as those in the original Asian communities, they still define 'concrete communities' which can be mobilized at a political level.

As an integral part of the process which transplanted Asian communities to Britain, immigrants from the Indian subcontinent also imported their traditional *communalist*-based politics. Communalist politics is a form which bourgeois democracy tends to assume in areas of the world where structured community relations co-exist with capitalism. In such areas, local community leaders are able to mobilize large numbers of votes for given politicians using their influence over networks of extended families. In return the local leaders receive access to privileges or public funds which they can administer or distribute to their community.

In India we can trace the existence of communalist politics back to political relations in the pre-capitalist south Asian system. In those times the basic social units were hierarchically structured economically self-sufficient villages. These units would relate to whatever high authority was in power at any time as indivisible units and, for example, would be taxed as a whole through negotiations between local leaders and representatives of the high authority. With the emergence of capitalism and the imposition of democratic forms these

traditional relations were transmuted into the form of communalist politics.

Communalist politics has found a symbiosis between traditional community relations and the democratic system, which are at least in principle incompatible. Communalist politics tends to distort the very nature of modern democracy that rests on the assumption that society is made by equal-and-free individuals, and that they can be numerically represented by an elected system.

This symbiosis is a form of class alliance which serves to control the Asian working class. The community leaders are never the poorest in the community. They are small businessmen (who can provide jobs), landlords or other 'notables' such as religious leaders. As a result they have a certain degree of personal power over the heads of the families in the community, which allows them to regulate behaviour and conduct as well as to control votes.

This power is then transmitted to the individual members of the community via patriarchal relations within each family. On the one hand each family has an interest in supporting their local leaders and their political connections. On the other hand, they depend on their community leader's discretion in distributing wealth and/or favours and feel under pressure to oblige all members in their family to be 'well behaved', i.e. respect and maintain the social and political status quo.²⁵

It is important to note that communalist politics can only sustain itself as long as the political system can guarantee material support to local leaders and their organizations, but also, importantly, as long as the community leaders can guarantee to have the power to mobilize their community at election time and maintain social peace and cohesion.²⁶

Communalist politics and the Labour Party

In Britain communalist politics involved the relations between community leaders and the British political parties at a local level, and in particular, the Labour party.

For decades the Labour party had enjoyed a special relation with Asian communities. This relation had nothing to do with old Labour's ideology or national politics, let alone its connection to the trade union movement. Simply, most Asian communities were in fact located in poor inner city areas, which were traditional strongholds for the Labour Party.²⁷

²⁵ In Aufheben #16 we criticized De Angelis's simplistic apology for human 'communities' in *The Beginning of History*. In this article we show that an analysis of the relation between the concrete muslim communities in Britain and capitalism needs more than a tautological observation that these communities are based on direct relations.

²⁶ A similar communalist politics allying the Christian Democratic Party and the Sicilian ruling class succeeded in guaranteeing more than a century of social peace in Sicily. Sicilian communalism was based on the distribution of housing and jobs, as well as on the mafia's military power. There was no ideological rationale (no 'multiculturalism') behind this alliance, but simply the combined power of welfare provisions and gunpowder. This ensured that the Sicilian 'community leaders' would have both the necessary authority and credibility.

²⁷ This of course didn't stop local leaders allying with Tory local politicians when the Conservatives were the dominant party.

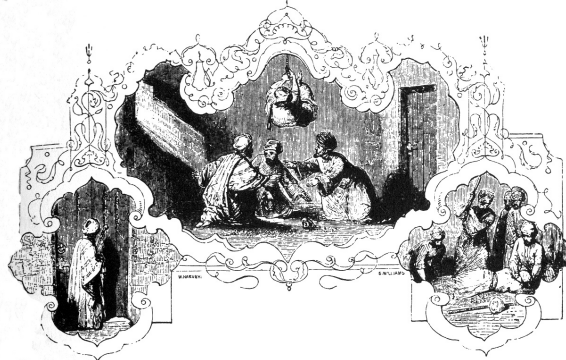
As the Asian communities grew and established themselves and as the trade union movement declined after the mid-80s, local Labour parties in many inner city areas came increasingly to depend on the communalist vote.

The election of New Labour in 1997 offered the historical occasion to allow the projection of the long-established communalist politics to the national level, but this projection necessitated the creation of a unified body which could claim to represent the 'muslim community' nationally and liaise with the new government.²⁸ In section 2 we saw how a unified body, the MCB, emerged out of a politicized middle class milieu who had previously come together around the Rushdie affair.

The MCB acted as the mediator for the 'British muslim community' and was consulted by the New Labour government on 'muslim issues'. And crucially it was recognized as a privileged advisor on funding for muslim initiatives which would benefit local 'community' organizations. On its part, once in government, New Labour began to pursue a series of what could be seen as pro-muslim policies. Thus, for example, abandoning the traditional Labour commitment to secular education, the New Labour government sanctioned the foundation of state-funded faith schools including Islamic schools. This was a vital concession to both community leaders, who saw Islamic schools as a means of preserving their communities, and Islamist leading members in the MCB who saw such schools as means of propagating Islam. The Government also provided national funding for various initiatives fostering muslim culture. Following the July bombings in London in 2005 the Government, at the behest of various muslim pressure groups including the MCB, passed legislation against religious hatred, which was promoted by New Labour's spinning machine as a sign of solidarity for the 'law abiding muslim community'.

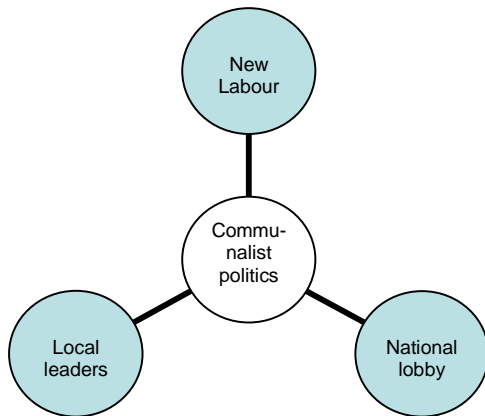
The three poles of the national alliance

With New Labour in power and the MCB acting as advisor on 'muslim issues' the 'British muslim community' had then become a reality. But what is this unified thing that has been created? It is not simply a number of individuals, lobby groups or communities, and not simply an abstract Islamist concept either. Rather, it is a combination of all these concrete and abstract elements, based on the interrelations, interests and tensions of three socio-political poles:



²⁸ Similar national relations were created with other lobbies such as the Sikh – however, we are not dealing with these groups.

- a) the leaders of real but divided Asian communities
- b) a national lobby which claims to represent a unified but abstract British 'muslim community'
- c) the Labour Party



Communalist politics is founded on the interrelations between these three poles.

In order to take advantage of a national communalist relation with New Labour, local leaders need a national, unified lobby, which they were unable to create by themselves due to their material divisions. As we said earlier, they also need mediators with the right connections and political skills. Only this mediation can guarantee their access to government support and funds, which is essential for their continuing control over their local communities.

The middle class national lobby of businessmen and professionals which came together during the Rushdie affair, often politicized and connected to Islamist organisations like Jamaat e-Islami, were able to create the MCB as a unified body. Yet they still need the involvement of a myriad of divided and parochial local leaders who have the real control over concrete communities and guarantee both electoral support to New Labour and social cohesion.

The third pole of this alliance, New Labour, needs the support of the 'muslim community' (in both its abstract and concrete aspects) for its electoral success. New Labour thus needs both a national representative whom they can consult, as well as the possibility to reach particular concrete communities. In a word, the Labour party needs the interplay of the representatives of the national, abstract, community and those of the concrete communities.

The 'muslim community' and New Labour: Contradictions

We have seen so far how the elements of the political alliance of New Labour with the 'British muslim community' needed each other. However, this same alliance also contains contradictions, which would come to the fore with the 'war on terrorism' and with the anti-war movement. We will see that most of these contradictions resulted from the class nature of

this political alliance. New Labour had to juggle contrasting interests of sections of the ruling classes, as well as the discontent of the working class and the potential threat to social order from sections of it, in particular young Asians.

New Labour caught between the language of big capital and the language of political Islam

There was a clear contradiction in New Labour, between the universalism implied by its neoliberalism and proselytising of liberal democratic values abroad, and its cultural relativism, which had informed its multiculturalist policies at home.

This contradiction arose from New Labour's abandonment of social democracy and their need to seek support from sections of the ruling class with diverging interests. On the one hand New Labour's universalism reflects its close affinity with international capital and in particular the finance capital represented by the City of London. On the other hand, New Labour's multiculturalist strategies for social cohesion at home have paved the way for a national alliance of New Labour and the 'British muslim community', represented at a national level by middle class elements, often embarrassingly close to Islamist organisations.

This contradiction came to the fore following the attack on the World Trade Centre in September 2001. After this attack the Bush regime took the opportunity to forcibly re-order the oil rich regions of the wider Middle East by invading first Afghanistan and then Iraq. This was justified in terms of bringing the universal values of 'freedom' and 'democracy' to this 'backward' region of the world. In what became known as the 'global war on terror' Islamic 'fundamentalism' now replaced communism as the principal enemy of western 'freedom and democracy. For the political Islamists, Bush's 'global war on terror', and his invasion of the 'muslim countries' of Afghanistan and Iraq, was a barely disguised attack on Islam itself. The interests of British capital required that British foreign policy should support the US. Yet this sat uneasily with New Labour's domestic social policy of multiculturalism, particularly its alignment with the 'British muslim community'.

Later we consider how New Labour sought to navigate this ideological contradiction. But first we must look at how the 'global war on terror' impacted on the 'British muslim community' itself.

The conflict in the Middle East and the conflicts in the MCB

The 'war on terror' would also bring to the fore the inherent contradictions in the MCB, and in the 'British muslim community' which it represented. We have seen that the MCB reflected the unity in opposition of concrete local communities, divided along ethnic lines, and whose division was encouraged by the material gains offered by various multiculturalist policies. This division had been overcome through an abstract unification offered by the ideology of political Islam – the unity of muslims as just abstractly 'muslims', irrespective of their belonging to families or local groups originating from different places with different languages and cultures, or of their real differing material and class interests.

In some respect the ‘war on terror’ was a blessing for the Islamist groups who had recently emerged as political protagonists. The Muslim Brotherhood-inspired MAB, which did not suffer from the inherent divisions of the MCB, eagerly joined the anti-war movement and the national Stop the War Coalition. Later, even the MCB supported the anti-war demonstrations. The Islamist interpretation that the war was an attack on Islam, and hence on all muslims, which had to be opposed by the ‘muslim community’ constituted a powerful ideological tool for the mobilization of millions of muslim individuals across the country.

The large anti-war demonstrations offered the tangible manifestation of what so far had been a purely conceptual entity – the ‘British muslim community’ was there en masse, it was visible, it marched in the street and shouted at Downing Street! In order to actually achieve this mobilization, MAB and other Islamist leaders had to face, and practically overcome, the parochial separations and traditional reciprocal hostility of various concrete communities across the country. This work and its result strengthened the position and prestige of middle class Islamist leaders.

However, this mobilization was connected with the abstract aspect of the ‘British muslim community’. We have seen in the previous section that the existence of this unified ‘community’ was based on the interplay of ideological and material aspects: economic gains and a national electoral alliance with the New Labour government. This made both community and national muslim leaders be very careful about opposing New Labour and even the war.

We will see in the next sections how this contradiction unfolded and how it explains why Respect failed to gain a political advantage from the anti-war movement.



Muslim youth and Islamic radicalism

The balance of opposition and unity in the communalist alliance of New Labour and the ‘muslim community’ in Britain, the fact that the multiculturalist strategies served to break down class struggle, and the fact that the anti-war movement did not lead to any political alternative seems to suggest that the British ruling class has found the secret to reaching an almost Hegelian synthesis of its contradictions. This is in fact untrue: like all alliances among sections of the ruling class, this one also does not abolish the antagonism of the proletariat – whose needs and demands necessarily contradicts any established equilibrium.

As we have seen, fundamental for the communalist relation of MCB and New Labour was the capacity of community leaders to both mobilize their community at election time, and guarantee some degree of social control. Yet with the progressive integration of British-born Asians into British capitalist society, the community leaders’ ability to deliver on this guarantee is steadily declining.

The promoters of this alliance sincerely believed that providing funds for religious and cultural demands would serve to pacify and satisfy the ‘ethnic minority’ and gain their loyalty, and community leaders counted on the power of traditional patriarchal respect and religion on individuals for re-imposing order. However, while state funds were diverted from the working class into the hands of local rulers and mosques, the working class within the Asian communities clearly saw through the vacuity of multiculturalist and communitarian practices. Lacking housing and decent income many Asians continued to be antagonistic to the state, the local authorities and, last but not least, the police.

In particular, the young generation increasingly resented the special relations between their community leaders and local authorities, which clearly appeared alien to their interests. As we said earlier, due to the creeping atomization of their relations with their own community, these young people did not feel bound to duties or allegiances to their elders, let alone their old priests or local leaders. As a result, community leaders and the patriarchal family increased their moral power over young individuals.

As we will mention briefly below, social unrest among young Asians continued through the 1990s and 2000s, and increasingly took the form of ‘race’ conflict between young gangs. The riots in Oldham (Great Manchester, May 2001), Leeds, Burnley, Bradford (June) and again Bradford, Stoke-on-Trent (July), were sparked by clashes between white and Asian gangs, stirred up by local election campaigns by the BNP. After the riots of 2001, in the Ritchie Report we read:

Police links with minority ethnic communities are at present based on a network of community leaders who in our view lack authority and credibility (p. 13).

The fact that the community leaders appeared to lack the power and credibility to maintain social order was an alarming factor for the stability of the communalist alliance. In response to these riots, the government started distancing themselves from their old ‘multiculturalist’ approach: in December 2001 Blunkett initiated a ‘debate about citizenship’ which would

eventually lead to the introduction of a 'citizenship test' for obtaining a UK passport and blamed 'shockingly divided communities' for the riots.²⁹

But besides riots and street fights the capacity of community leaders to maintain authority and control was challenged by the success of radical Islam among young people. In response to frustration and out of resentment with their elders who seem to compromise with the establishment, young Asian people looked with growing interest to radical Islam. Thousands joined groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir, girls took up the full veil, boys adopted extreme sexist and conservative views – outdoing the authority and patriarchy of their own parents and thus defusing their power on their same terrain.

The inability of community leaders to prevent the diffusion of radical Islamist ideas was exacerbated by the 'war on terror'. The political Islamist propaganda of middle class leaders of MAB and MCB, which they needed to promote themselves and to mobilize the 'muslim community', only served to legitimize similar Islamist ideas of more radical groups which only seemed to take the moderate positions of the Muslim Brothers or Jamaat e-Islam to their logical conclusion and coherently opposed, without the rather pathetic weaknesses or embarrassing compromises, New Labour and its aggressive foreign policy.

The 'war on terror' and the events that followed would reveal that the threat of radical Islam was not at all a threat to the bourgeois system: rather it was a threat to the credibility of MCB and the stability of its alliance with New Labour.

The war and the veil



Not in the name of the 'British muslim community'?

After the shock of the riots in May-July 2001, 'muslim Britain' would have to face its biggest public relations problem ever. In September 2001 a small band of radical Islamists from Saudi Arabia, connected to Osama Bin Laden's Al Qaida, managed to destroy the World Trade Centre in New York. There had been many Islamist bombings around the world, but this attack was given a special significance by the US government: the

western world was not safe, Islamic terrorists could hit *the US*. The 'war or terror' began, with US-led invasions first of Afghanistan and then Iraq, ideologically propped up by a never ending series of commemorations for the victims of the 11th of September. The dead in the towers' rubble would only be the first of a large number: they would be followed by the innocent victims of the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Although the geo-strategical reason for the war was obvious, George Bush claimed that this war was 'a clash of civilizations', between the democratic western world against the uncivilized Islamic threat, and even called it a 'crusade'. Ironically, Bush's words would be perfectly approved by those proclaiming to represent the opposed 'civilization': political Islam. By presenting the attack on the Middle East as an attack 'on Islam' political Islamists around the world sought to rally muslim populations against the west and pro-US governments.

However, creating a 'British muslim' movement against the war was not so easy for the MCB, which had concrete divisions and interests. The leaders of the MCB were split between the Islamist call and the need to save their special relations with New Labour: it was in the interests of the 'muslim community' to play a moderate, pro-government card.

Things were not easy for New Labour as well. Although Blair was desperate in following Bush to Afghanistan and interested in exploiting the 'terrorism scare' to justify this war, he could not adopt Bush's ideological 'clash of civilization' call – or risk a disaster for the government's relations with the 'British muslim community'.

Immediately after September 11, then, both the British government and the MCB had common interests in defusing serious political conflicts around the issue of the 'muslim community', and to oppose both political Islam and the suggestion that 'all muslims' were a threat to civilization. On its part the MCB made every effort to reassure the government that the 'muslim community' was moderate and rejected terrorism, while the government reassured the MCB that the invasion of Afghanistan was not against Islam (and muslims) but against Bin Laden.³⁰

However, these efforts did not solve the inevitable problem – Blair had an interest in attacking Afghanistan, while within the MCB opposition to the war remained. Although the MCB was not interested in a full-frontal confrontation with the government and even refused to support the first anti-war march, the MCB leaders eventually came together and signed a letter which asked the government to avoid a war in Afghanistan and seek diplomatic responses to the September 11 attack. Going a bit further, a council of religious representatives within the MCB issued a fatwa which declared the bombing of Afghanistan unlawful. In response, Blair apparently stopped returning the MCB's calls in a grump.

When it was clear that despite his friendship and trust for the 'British muslim community' in Britain Blair would attack the muslims of Afghanistan, a serious split threatened the MCB and eventually the MCB had to support the anti-war movement and endorse the following demonstrations. Yet Blair continued to keep his phone off the hook and preferred to relate to his

²⁹ news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/1703322.stm

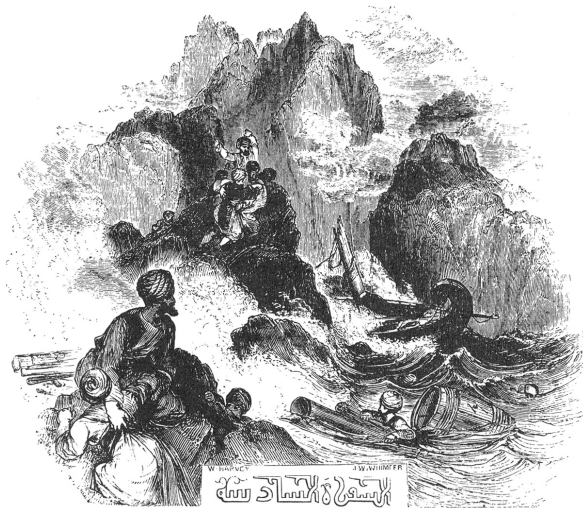
³⁰ 'Lobbying and Marching' by J. Birt in *Muslim Britain: Community under Pressure*, edited by T. Abbas, Zed Books, 2005.

New Labourite muslim MPs. Worrying for their careers (and their privileged positions in their communities) all the MPs except one signed a paper approving an attack on Afghanistan. Later, however, they disowned it.

In 2002, the StWC involved the proactive MAB in sponsoring a demonstration for Palestine. Subsequently, the MAB got actively and enthusiastically involved in the anti-war movement during the years 2002-3 and was at the front of the massive demonstrations against the attack on Iraq. It also formally joined the Coalition in 2002. In contrast with the teetering MCB, the smaller and more homogeneous MAB showed to have a stronger political line; however, this coherent politics was possible because the MAB was a small and politically defined organisation – and for this reason it could not claim to represent ‘the muslim community’.

The anti-war movement had reached its apogee on the eve of the invasion of Iraq, when, on 15 February 2003, two million people marched in London against the war. However, already by the end of April the war was over and the movement went into sharp decline eventually leaving little more than the leftwing rump. The MAB retreated from the front of increasingly shrinking demonstrations while the ‘muslim community’ returned to the protective communalist wing of New Labour.

In May 2005 New Labour was re-elected to power with the aid of the muslim vote; and, as a cherry on the communalist cake, in June 2005, Mister MCB, Iqbal Sacranie, was knighted for ‘services to the muslim community, to charities and to community relations’. With a fanfare of royal celebrations peace was again made between the New Labour establishment and the ‘British muslim community’.



Put your house in order

However, new problems lurked ahead. Despite introducing increasingly tight police measures and implementing a long series of increasingly draconian Anti-Terrorism laws, the government had continued targeting the wrong people. Searches were made in asylum seekers’ homes, and people

were charged with immigration offences or accused of using their grandma’s favourite laxative, ricinoleic oil³¹, to make ‘ricin bombs’. At the same time, the Anti-Terrorism Act was used to threaten and arrest liberal peace campaigners, and the ‘terrorism scare’ was exploited to introduce a new computerized system for state control, the ‘Identity Card’.

In the face of all these ‘anti-terror’ efforts, on July 7 2005 Britain had its own mini-version of September 11. A small group of rather amateurish young Islamists planned to blow themselves up on the London underground system and succeeded in blowing up three trains and a bus, causing 52 deaths. Immediately, revelations came out that three of them were British of Pakistani descent born in Leeds or Bradford. One was a Jamaican immigrant, who had recently converted to Islam through his contacts with young native Asians. As if this was not enough, two weeks later another group of young British muslims was involved in a follow up terrorist attack which, this time, failed miserably. There were more muslim young people spread throughout Britain, who were plotting suicide attacks! This revelation shook the assumptions on which the MCB and the government had collaborated – that the terrorist threat was from abroad, and that the ‘muslim community’ was able to contain its children. One of the material foundations of communalist politics was crumbling.

Up until then the government had centred their counter-terrorism operations on refugees from muslim countries, most of whom had little connections with the long established muslim communities in Britain. At the beginning of August 2005, in a speech presented as historical, Blair stated that ‘the rules of the game had changed’. Although Blair stressed that the ‘muslim community’ had been *and still was* the government’s partner in dealing with terrorism, he said that the government now planned to extend measures like ‘control orders’ which were previously limited to foreign national suspected of terrorism, so that they could be applied to British people.

Yet the extension of police powers, and the targeting of ‘home grown terrorists’ to combat terrorism threatened to alienate established muslim communities. As a consequence, the Government stressed the need for a partnership with the ‘law-abiding British muslim community’ to counter the spread of extremist political Islamic ideas amongst young muslims. In October 2005 the government launched a consultation called ‘Preventing Extremism Together’, which was concerned with the problem of confronting radicalism among the youth.³² One of the outcomes of this consultation was the creation of the ‘Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board’, in June 2006, with the MCB onboard. This body was expected to supervise the activity of Mosques in Britain and fight pockets of radical propaganda.

In return for the co-operation of ‘the muslim community’, and to counter the rise of anti-muslim feeling generated by the July bombings, the government introduced new legislation. On February 16th 2006 the Racial and Religious Hatred Bill

³¹ i.e. castor oil

³² <http://www.communities.gov.uk/archived/general-content/communities/preventingextremismtogether/>

received royal assent. It seemed that peace had been restored between New Labour and the British 'muslim community'.

While Islamic terrorism was unable to threaten the renewed peace between the government and 'the muslim community', new controversy was stirred up in the Summer of 2006 by a massacre of a different nature. On July 12 Israel invaded Lebanon in an effort to drive Hezbollah from southern Lebanon. Yet Israel's hopes of a quick victory in a matter of days were soon dashed. As the Israeli army struggled to make headway against the stubborn resistance of Hezbollah's forces, Bush and Blair procrastinated about calling a ceasefire. While shootings and bombings continued for days, it became clear that Bush and Blair had been complicit in Israel's attack on Lebanon and were waiting for Israel to achieve its military objectives before calling for a ceasefire.

Blair's pro-Israeli stance was another test for New Labour's Islamist allies in the MCB. The procrastination of Bush and Blair in calling for a ceasefire while Lebanese villages were being destroyed by Israeli warplanes was widely condemned and briefly revived the anti-war movement. Pressure from the anti-war movement was stepped up on Blair to fulfil previous promises to leave office.

Pushed into a corner by criticisms and expecting an Islamist backlash, the government decided to make a concerted effort – to put pressure on the moderate 'muslim community' and oblige them to take a position, once and for all, against radical Islam. In September 2006 Home Secretary John Reid urged muslim parents to watch out for signs of extremism in their children. Shortly after, in October 2006, in an article for a local newspaper, government minister Jack Straw wrote that he preferred that muslim women who came to his surgeries removed their veils so he could see their faces when he was talking to them.

In support of Straw, Tony Blair said that the full veil was a 'mark of separation', Gordon Brown added that that 'it would be better for Britain if fewer muslim women wore veils', and Harriet Harman said that she 'wanted the veil abolished'. The New Labourite choir received unanimous ovations from the tabloids and the BNP.

The government's message was clear: the 'muslim community' had to guarantee to draw a line between good and moderate Islam and radical Islam and take a distance from it, and that it was able to set their 'own house in order'. As never before, the government appeared to take a firm position regarding the assimilation of 'the muslim community'.

With the message came also the threat: to dump the MCB and replace it. Yet with what? We have seen that the 'British muslim community' was a construct, resulting from the interplay of interests of various political and community groups and New Labourite politicians. Outside this construct there were divided communities or simply individuals. Nevertheless the government went for the bluff and promoted a new national group: the 'Sufi Muslim Council'. Launched at the Houses of Parliament in July, the Sufi Muslim Council was rapidly brought to prominence following the end of the Lebanon war – its leader Haras Rafiq was allowed star appearances on TV news programmes and Newsnight and his group was presented

as a credible representative of the 'Moderate British muslim community'.³³

But it was far too easy for the supporters of the MCB to find holes in the Sufi group. It was immediately found that Rafiq was a young businessman with no background in lobbying or community work. Worse, Rafiq had close relations with members of the Labour Friends of Israel, and his spiritual inspiration came from the US-based Islamic Supreme Council of America, whose leader, Sheik Hisham Kabanni, was very close to the neo-conservative government and an apologist for the Israel occupation.³⁴ If common muslims might not feel 'represented' by a lobby like the MCB because of its Islamist inspirations, they would even less feel represented by a bunch of Israeli apologists!

At any rate, by Christmas all tensions were over again. The Israeli army had been defeated by Hezbollah and had retreated. Blair announced that he would resign. And the 'British muslim community' returned back to ranks. Peace was made again and, as soon as the old allies of New Labour appeared willing to collaborate, the Sufi group vanished to thin air – from whence it had come.

Respect and Islamophobia

The anti-war movement offered exciting times to the SWP (SWP), the biggest Trotskyist group in Britain.³⁵ The SWP was central in setting up the Stop the War Coalition and controlling its workings. The anti-war demonstrations in 2003, with millions on the streets, made them daydream to be at the lead of a new political movement, a large front involving the millions of muslims who had been willing to protest.



³³ Sufism is a mystical interpretation of Islam which sees religion as a private and apolitical issue. The Sufi Council of Britain claimed that up to 80% of Britain's two million muslims come from the Sufi tradition (only because most muslims are apolitical!). This claim was attacked by other muslim groups.

³⁴ In 1999 Kabanni gave a clandestine testimony to the US State Department in which he claimed that 80% of mosque in the US were 'extremist', and that the Israeli occupation was legitimate.

³⁵ It is however a minor party, with about 2,000 members.

Dumping the Socialist Alliance, which had attempted to unite various far left groups, the SWP entered negotiations with the central Birmingham Mosque and the prominent green journalist and campaigner George Monbiot to create a broad popular front to be known as the Peace and Justice Coalition. It was hoped that this Peace and Justice Coalition would draw in both the Green party as well as the MAB to give electoral expression to the anti-war movement. However, both the MAB and the Green Party refused to join. Unrepentant, the SWP did not abandon the idea of a broad popular anti-war front and at the beginning of 2004 it succeeded in bringing together a number of extremely small left-wing parties, some individual community leaders who had been involved in the anti-war movement from areas like Tower Hamlets and Birmingham, and anti-war star and martyr George Galloway MP, who had been expelled from the Labour Party for his opposition to the war in Iraq. A new party, Respect, was born, with George Galloway as its figure head.

For the SWP the aim was clear – to have a large front with ‘the muslims’, which, the SWP simplistically assumed, coincided with Islamist leaders. Yet in order to have a front with the Islamist world the SWP needed to abandon its traditional lefty line on a number of issues which would create controversy among their prospective allies: gay rights, sexual equality, even their simplistic ‘teach yourself Marxism’ went out the window. In exchange, the SWP members were asked to ‘teach themselves political Islam’: first of all, the idea that the wars in the Middle East were anti-muslim crusades.³⁶

SWP theorists were called to re-think their criticism of political Islam, which they loyally did despite the intellectual embarrassment caused by having to contradict their own writings. Chris Harman had to revise his evaluation of political Islam, which he had presented in ‘The Prophet and the Proletariat’. In that pamphlet Harman concluded that, although one needs to understand why Islamist groups gain support from the proletariat, the left cannot ally with them. In a memorable conference of the academic Marxist journal *Historical Materialism* in December 2006, Harman explained why the left *can* ally with political Islam (or at least with *some, progressive, Islamists* like Hezbollah).

Having embraced the creed of political Islam, the SWP assumed as theirs the view that any political attack against Islamist organizations or regimes was an attack against ‘muslims’ – so racism tout court. The SWP was happy to silence criticism of social repression out carried on workers, women, students and gay organizations in countries like Iraq and Iran. Those who dared to speak out were accused of being ‘anti-Islam racists’.³⁷ Later, ‘Hands Off the People of Iran’, a

leftwing organization which opposed both US imperialism and the regime of Teheran would be banned from the StWC. Instead, representatives of al-Sadr’s power circle were invited to London and given a platform at StWC’s rallies.

A frenzy of activity was imposed on the SWP’s foot soldiers, they were asked to leaflet mosques and create alliances on campuses with Islamic youth groups. This activity reached its hysterical peak when in 2006 the government appeared to take a harder position on radical Islam. The StWC used the government’s threats to the MCB to accuse New Labour of ‘Islamophobia’ and call for a national conference.

Yet after all this activity and long canvassing, the SWP was not able to lure many muslims into their front. In Brighton we observed with amusement that the SWP’s mosque leafleting was totally unsuccessful: the most politically motivated Islamists would see a socialist party as an enemy, while moderate ‘community leaders’ and mullahs would rather not be involved in political activity at all; and were probably embarrassed by the StWC’s enthusiasm about Islamism.³⁸

At the national level, already by the time Respect was set up, the main organizations of muslim Britain had turned away from the anti-war movement. The more active MAB, which had joined the anti-war movement and the StWC, showed not to be interested in Respect, and did not support its own ex-president Anas al-Tikriti when he stood as a Respect candidate in the European elections of 2004.³⁹ Eventually only a pro-Respect splinter from MAB, the ‘British muslim Initiative’ led by al-Tikriti, continued to support increasingly shrinking StWC demonstrations.

Unsurprisingly, in all its life span until the bitter split of 2007, Respect was not able to get more than twenty councillors, twelve of them in Tower Hamlets and had only one MP – Galloway.⁴⁰

So what had gone wrong? Although it was willing to oppose New Labour and its politics, the SWP could not see the concrete basis on which New Labour had founded its electoral support in muslim Britain. More idealistic than New Labour, the SWP had taken the concept of ‘muslim community’ for granted, they had accepted the Islamist ideology which presented the ‘muslim community’ as unified by Islam, and expected that pure ideological outrage against the war ‘on Islam’ would turn all ‘muslims’ away from New Labour.

It is true that such ideological views were a fundamental part in the electoral alliance between New Labour and the MCB – however, we have seen that both New Labour and the MCB had been painfully clear about the contradicting material aspects of their alliance. And above all on the need to fund this

³⁶ By packing a meeting in 2006 the SWP obliged Brighton’s Sussex Action for Peace to approve by vote a Declaration on Islamophobia, which described the recent wars in the Middle East as wars ‘on muslims’. Challenged by other participants, the SWP members insisted that these wars were motivated by ‘anti-muslim racism’.

³⁷ During the national NUS conference in 2006 the SWP organized a boycott of a speech by Houzan Mahmoud, the representative abroad of the ‘Organizations of Women’s Freedom in Iraq’ who was to speak about attacks on workers and feminists in Iraq by Islamist forces like al-Sadr’s Mahdi army.

³⁸ After months leafleting at the three or four local mosques, the Brighton members of the SWP have so far not been able to get *one* Asian individual to their meetings. In 2007, after a long search, they were able to find one mullah from Worthing who agreed to speak at a Sussex Action for Peace public meeting. When this man came, we discovered why – he was a hippy-looking white British man, who had been converted to Islam by his wife from the Far East, and who could share western and liberal views with the SWP.

³⁹ Ergo he was not elected.

⁴⁰ George Galloway’s old seat in Glasgow was abolished due to boundary changes. At the 2005 general election he stood in Tower Hamlets and defeated the sitting New Labour MP Oona King.

alliance on the material provision of funds and resources which Respect could not hope to promise to community leaders! While it is *not on bread alone that shall man live*, man definitely votes for those who have bread, and this was New Labour.

While the 'muslim community' voted almost unanimously for New Labour, Respect only received the votes of Galloway's faithful constituents. The exceptional muslim votes came from odd pockets like Tower Hamlets, which, for historical reasons, had not been able to develop a structured local community which could enter into a multiculturalist and communalist alliance with New Labour.⁴¹

However, where Respect won muslim votes they were gained through the same communalist politics which their idealistic and simplistic approach prevented them from critically identify as a mechanism of class domination. As the *Weekly Worker* revealed, Respect candidates in Birmingham were owners of shops and flats of entire streets and could gain electoral support from their tenants because of the blackmail of property relations. Not only did the SWP compromise with homophobic Islamists – it also endorsed a class politics which exploited the power of the petit bourgeoisie over the working class within the muslim communities.

Despite the SWP's idealism, the greedy and petit bourgeois foundations of their politics gave them the final backlash. When the anti-war movement declined and the SWP split up from Galloway, most Respect councillors preferred to follow Galloway. Only four out of twelve in Tower Hamlets remained on the SWP's side, but within months, three defected to the Labour party and one to the Tories. *That's where the bread was.*

Croissants and roses: A conclusion

At the time of writing (Autumn 2008) it is more than seven years since the launching of the 'global war on terror' following the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York. It is also more than five years since the huge anti-war demonstrations on the eve of the invasion of Iraq, which mobilized the 'British muslim community' to march against New Labour's foreign policy. As we have seen, in the intervening years the anti-war movement has declined and the tensions between New Labour and the 'British muslim community' have subsided. Now even the SWP has at long last seen that the attempt to win over the muslim vote over the issue of the war has been a dead end; and in order to extricate themselves the SWP has had to provoke a rather acrimonious split in Respect.

⁴¹ The reasons are not totally known to us – it was perhaps because Tower Hamlets had been traditionally left out of the 'muslim' network which referred to the MCB. Many of the muslims in Tower Hamlets were Bangladeshi people, among the most disadvantaged of British Asians. The borough is also partly inhabited by new refugees with no established family links. Tower Hamlets locals related in small community groups, including liberal social centres, and were 'represented' by strong mosques or other organizations interested in linking up with New Labour.

So what now for New Labour and the 'British muslim community'? A little more than a year ago all seemed to be well for New Labour. Tony Blair, who had come to personify the disastrous invasion of Iraq, had at long last gone. Under their new leader they could now move on from the splits and divisions that had arisen from the war in Iraq. Not only had peace been more or less restored with the 'British muslim community', but more generally New Labour could bask in their achievements of the past ten years in creating their new Britain. All but the most extreme in the bourgeois political spectrum were now essentially New Labour. The old Labour left had been unable even to muster enough nominations to get on the ballot paper and Brown had been elected leader of the Labour party unopposed. At the same time, the Conservative party under the new leadership of Blair clone David Cameron now claimed to be more 'New Labour' than the Labour party.

Yet their moment of triumph under Brown was not to last long. The success of New Labour had ultimately depended on the long economic upswing. This had allowed them to pursue pro-business policies and low taxes for the middle classes at the same time as substantially increasing public spending on health and education. Now that, in the words of Mervyn King Governor of the Bank of England, the 'NICE' decade is over for the British economy, the New Labour electoral base is breaking up. Over the past year the large-scale desertion of its long neglected traditional working class supporters has shocked the Labour Party. For the first time in more than a decade there would seem to be a real possibility of a Tory government.

Under Cameron, the leadership of the Conservative party has accepted the ruling consensus of a 'new diverse, meritocratic and multicultural Britain' established by New Labour – although this acceptance will have to be tempered by its need to mollify its die-hard Thatcherite activist base. Indeed, Cameron is perhaps more committed to communitarianism than New Labour has been; seeing it as a means to reduce the role of the state by harnessing voluntary community and religious organisations. As a consequence, a Conservative government is likely to be well disposed towards building alliances with the MCB, and it is highly likely that the businessmen and professionals of the abstract national muslim community will not be adverse to transferring their affections to the Tories.

The multiculturalist strategies that have served to sustain divisions within the working class are likely to continue under a Conservative government. But as we have seen, the emergence of the 'British muslim community' depended not only on state-sponsored multiculturalist policies but also on the rise of political Islam. As the war passes into history will political Islam still be able to hold together the diverse Asian communities? And perhaps more importantly will the ideology of political Islam still be able to maintain its hold over the more militant sections of the young Asian working class? This all remains to be seen.